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# Child Soldiers in Myanmar's Armed Conflict and Victimization of Children: Implications for Human Security

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## Abstract

*The abuse experienced by children in armed conflict, most notably through the forced conscription as child soldiers, is one of the most egregious breaches of international law and a considerable threat to the security of human beings. The acute civil war in Myanmar, significantly worsened by the military coup in February 2021, has seen an alarming increase in the occurrence of grave violations impacting children, including recruitment, abduction, sexual violence, and denial of humanitarian access. This paper examines the complexities of children's victimization as child soldiers in Myanmar—physical, psychological, social, and structural victimization and the implications for human security.*

Keywords: Child soldiers, Human security, Armed conflict, Tatmadaw, Victimization.

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## 1. Introduction

The victimization of children in armed conflict is a serious breach of international law that merits unequivocal condemnation and prompt action. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms that a “child“ is any person under the age of 18 and therefore entitled to protections as a child in armed conflict (International Committee of the Red Cross, n.d.; United Nations, 1989). Many children in conflict zones are recruited, trained, and exploited by both state and non-state armed groups (Human Rights Watch, 2002; ICC-CPI, 2009; Refworld, 2004; Schauer & Elbert, 2009).

Myanmar is one of the most severe, chronic cases. The country has experienced a prolonged period of civil war spanning decades (Human Rights Watch, 2007a; Stimson Center, n.d.; The Upstream Journal, n.d.). UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025a). The conflict includes the Myanmar Armed Forces (Tatmadaw), ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), and, very recently, anti-junta resistance groups, including People’s Defence Forces (PDFs). Since the 2021 military coup, grave violations against children have escalated and spiked dramatically, including reports of recruitment, killing, maiming, and sexual violence (Human Rights Watch, 2025; Mizzima, 2024; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025a). Children are often abducted from schools, displaced from their homes, or forced into armed service through either deception, coercion, or economic need (Human Rights Watch, 2025; Humanium, n.d.; Pulitzer Center, n.d.; The Upstream Journal, n.d.; United States Department of State, 2024).

In addition to the immediate detrimental effects on child soldiers, using children as soldiers has wider and more troublesome effects for human security. The pervasive use of child soldiers reduces community integration, embeds intergenerational trauma, and continues cycles of poverty and violence. (ISS Africa, 2025; Schauer & Elbert, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2018; Wickham, 2025). It creates social disintegration and undermines families, thereby digging up the very roots of resilient societies (Schauer & Elbert, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2018). On an economic front, the crisis robs communities future human capital by disrupting education and health services, thereby disrupting both national development and the potential productivity of natural human capital for the long term (ICC-CPI, 2009; ISS Africa, 2025; Wickham, 2025).

Politically, it stimulates insecurity and undermines peacebuilding by amplifying grievances, raising the chances of re-recruitment, and resuming violence (ISS Africa, 2025; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2018). Hence, the harm inflicted upon child soldiers is consequential not only as a humanitarian disaster but as a structural barrier to peace, development, and security in Myanmar and the wider region. This paper examines these interconnected dimensions in depth and



provides a way forward for politically, legally, and community-based interventions.

## **2. The Context of Armed Conflict in Myanmar**

Myanmar has been embroiled in internal conflicts for decades, often driven by ethnic tensions, political struggles, and territorial disputes. These conflicts have created surroundings wherein the recruitment and use of child soldiers has become alarmingly commonplace. The Myanmar Armed Forces, referred to as the Tatmadaw, together with numerous ethnic armed groups, have been implicated in the recruitment of children, often via coercion, abduction, or fake guarantees (Save the Children, 2017).

### **2.1 Child recruitment and use in the Tatmadaw: Drivers of underage recruitment**

Armed struggle, associated insecurity, and excessive stages of attrition have ensured that the Myanmar military is under regular pressure to maintain its troop energy, necessitating non-stop recruitment and resulting in ongoing reports of forced recruitment, which includes children (Human Rights Watch, 2020). In June 2014, the Tatmadaw issued a directive mentioning that Infantry Regiments and Light Infantry Regiments could no longer directly recruit and that recruitment would only take regions via specified gadgets and facilities (Geneva Call, 2020). While the implementation and impact of those processes have not begun to be independently demonstrated, such measures should doubtlessly reduce pressured underage recruitment.

Until these days, in the absence of a respectable recruitment quota, battalion commanders, especially in infantry and other combat units, have been recognized to apply tremendous causal stress on their subordinates to supply new recruits (Save the Children, 2017). Child Soldiers International indicates that navy officers and civilian brokers continue to use misrepresentation, intimidation, coercion, and enticement to obtain recruits, including those under 18 (Child Soldiers International, 2019). Civilian brokers regularly recruit boys under pretenses, which include offering those jobs as drivers (Amnesty International, 2019).

The manner of underage recruitment using the Tatmadaw remains in large part unchanged from reviews during the last decade by the UN and NGOs (International Crisis Group, 2020). Verified cases by using the UN Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMR) display that youngsters are recruited from diverse areas of Myanmar, with trends varying in step with population density, socioeconomic situations, and the presence or absence of conflict in every region (Geneva Call, 2020).

## **2.2 The Scope, Numbers, and the Process of Child Soldier Recruitment**

The recruitment of child soldiers in Myanmar is a pervasive problem affecting numerous children who are coerced or deceived into becoming a members of armed agencies (Child Soldiers International, 2019). Children are often kidnapped or lured under false pretenses of safety, food, or instructional possibilities, and subjected to rigorous training and indoctrination upon recruitment (Human Rights Watch, 2020). The practice of falsifying age documents, such as National Registration Cards (NRC) or Citizenship Scrutiny Cards (CSC), remains rampant and unchecked, facilitating underage recruitment (Amnesty International, 2019).

Recruitment techniques vary across Myanmar's regions: rural children are frequently cornered even as commuting to high school or seeking employment; also, at the same time, city regions witness recruitment at busy locations like railway stations and markets by way of civilian agents and junior officers (Geneva Call, 2020). The recruitment influences poor and uneducated youngsters, who are promised moneymaking jobs or coerced with threats of imprisonment for missing right identification (Save the Children, 2017). Once recruited, child soldiers face harsh conditions in navy camps, consisting of overcrowded barracks, insufficient meals, and ordinary bodily abuse (International Crisis Group, 2020).

The children are frequently falsified during recruitment, due to their role as adult soldiers while training and deployment, exposing them to sizable risks in active combat zones (Save the Children, 2017). Those who attempt to escape face excessive repercussions, are labelled as deserters, and are subjected to imprisonment, regularly going through worse penalties than folks who recruit them (Amnesty International, 2019). Despite the latest directives from the Tatmadaw Kyi to expedite the discharge of toddler recruits proven by using worldwide bodies, challenges continue to be in shielding those youngsters from retribution and ensuring their secure rehabilitation (Child Soldiers International, 2019).

## **3. Victimization of Child Soldiers**

The victimization of child soldiers in Myanmar is multifaceted, encompassing bodily, psychological, and social dimensions (Child Soldiers International, 2019). This complicated victimization not only has an immediate impact on the well-being of those children but also has a long-lasting impact on their improvement and integration into society (Save the Children, 2017). Understanding these dimensions is essential for growing powerful interventions and support mechanisms (Amnesty International, 2019).



### **3.1 Physical Victimization**

Child soldiers are exposed to extreme violence and harsh conditions, which take a heavy toll on their physical health (Amnesty International, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2020). They are often forcibly recruited and forced into combat, putting them at constant risk of injury or death (Save the Children, 2017). In war, these children can be used as frontline soldiers, bearers, or even human shields, roles that expose them to the most dangerous elements of war (Child Soldiers International, 2019). The physical demands of accessing weapons and heavy equipment, combined with inadequate nutrition and medical care, further deteriorate their health (Amnesty International, 2019).

In addition, physical abuse is common among child soldiers. They may endure beatings, torture, and other forms of physical punishment for disobedience or failure of their duties (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Sexual violence is also a major concern, particularly for young women who are routinely raped and sexually exploited (Amnesty International, 2019; Save the Children, 2017). The physical consequences of such abuse are severe, leading to injuries, chronic pain, and sexually transmitted diseases (Child Soldiers International, 2019). Many child soldiers suffer lifelong disabilities that hinder their ability to lead normal lives after conflict (Save the Children, 2017).

### **3.2 Psychological Victimization**

The psychological impact of child soldiering is extreme and long-lasting (Amnesty International, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2020). It includes multiple exposures to extreme violence, including brutal murders and mutilations, trauma and suffering, all of which will have left emotional wounds that are deep and often permanent (Child Soldiers International, 2019). Numerous stresses are created from incessant threats of death and the need to resort to trauma and violence to survive (Amnesty International, 2019).

The exposure and impact of child soldiering can give rise to several psychiatric illnesses, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide (Save the Children, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2020). PTSD is most often diagnosed, and symptoms include flashbacks, nightmares, pervasive guilt, and emotional numbness that continues long after the children have exited combat (Child Soldiers International, 2019). Depression may take the form of feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and loss of interest in daily activities, while anxiety spectrum experiences such as panic attacks, hypervigilance, and withdrawal behaviours may take place from agoraphobia (Amnesty International, 2019).

In addition to the general mental health issues, clinical and neuropsychological research indicates that child soldiers suffer from chronic, cumulative traumatic stress based on direct exposure to combat, shelling, torture, rape, and being coerced to kill or witness atrocities (ICC-CPI, 2009; Schauer & Elbert, 2009). These traumatic experiences impact emotional regulation, social functioning, and cognitive development (ICC-CPI, 2009). High levels of drug dependence, psychosis, dissociation, and aggression in former child soldiers pose considerable difficulties for their reintegration into a peaceful society (Schauer & Elbert, 2009).

The pain inflicted by child soldiery extends beyond the individual to later generations. Parents who have experienced trauma of war may be challenged to create a sense of emotional security and protection for their children, contributing to intergenerational stress and poor attachment (Schauer & Elbert, 2009). Children who are born to mothers who have been traumatized may develop “disordered” stress-regulation systems, which, taken together, can exacerbate levels of irritability, regulation of affect, and the likelihood of developing mental health disorders. This cycle of trauma is self-reinforcing, threatening families, and undermining peacebuilding processes.

In addition to the psychological harm, child soldiers and war-affected communities endure high physical injury and mortality (Schauer & Elbert, 2009). Traumatic stress is associated with disruption of the immune system, cardiovascular disease, chronic pain, and neurological damage. In battle, children have unequal exposure to violence, often enlisted as frontline fighters, porters, and sometimes human shields (Schauer & Elbert, 2009), which leads to greater injury and death rates.

### **3.3 Social Victimization**

Child soldiers in Myanmar endure significant social stigma and discrimination because of armed conflict (Human Rights Watch, 2020; United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF,) 2019). The hurdles of reintegration are compounded by the fact that their communities have often viewed these children and youth with suspicion or fear (International Rescue Committee (IRC,) 2018). This means that they encounter social abuse, making it more difficult for them in their attempt to rebuild their lives and be accepted (IRC, 2018). Being in the army meant children were separated from their families and communities, which means they lost social relationships and networks of support (UNICEF, 2019). While in the army, children are often forced to perform atrocities on their own communities, which reinforces their exclusion from the communities they knew (Human Rights Watch, 2020). When these children arrive back at their families, they often struggle to reconnect because their families see them as perpetrators rather than the victims that they are (Human Rights Watch, 2020).



### **3.3.1 Erosion of Community Cohesion and Trust**

Social isolation for ex-combatants results from the stigma accompanied by negative responses from hosting communities, and their own social interaction, caused by psychological problems, which also restrict their social life (Schauer & Elbert, 2009). They are very often doubly stigmatized for having participated in combat and being negatively affected psychologically (Schauer & Elbert, 2009). This can be more pronounced if it is believed they committed atrocities, particularly against members of their own clan (Schauer & Elbert, 2009). Returning girls and women, especially those who have experienced sexual violence or returned with children from sexual encounters, face the worst stigma (Schauer & Elbert, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2023; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2018). This social isolation and stigma can be a strong incentive for individuals to return to armed groups, creating a vicious cycle of failed reintegration, undermining peacebuilding efforts.

The mass abduction of children is more than just a means of bolstering fighting forces; it is a weapon used to subjugate and humiliate entire communities (United Nations, 2015). The resulting separation of families adds layers of loss and trauma to the terror of war. Growing up in broken and war-torn environments has adverse social consequences, such as increased alcohol and drug abuse, as well as early unprotected sexual relations that lead to teenage pregnancy and HIV/AIDS through destroyed family, school, and health systems (ICC-CPI, 2009; Schauer & Elbert, 2009).

The fact that the children are being used to terrorize and humiliate communities signifies a calculated intent in the use of children to undermine the will of communities and the social fabric of communities, so that children are both victims and tools of psychological warfare. The psychological effects also touch an entire community, not just the families directly affected, requiring any intervention to recognize a community process. Collectively dealing with trauma and building community resilience should consider the psychological impact. Additionally, indigenous cultural means of healing and reconciliation are seldom available because important community members like parents, teachers, and traditional healers are also affected by war stressors (Schauer & Elbert, 2009) thereby reducing a community's collective capacity to heal, rebuild, and facilitate the reintegration of those affected by the conflict.

### **3.3.2 Perpetuation of Violence and Intergenerational Cycles of Conflict**

The widespread use of child soldiers perpetuates an ongoing cycle of violence, significantly hindering the chances of achieving sustainable peace and stability in

Myanmar. Children are inevitably affected by violence in conflict zones – either as fighters or in other support roles – which essentially guarantees that the conflict will continue thereafter (UNICEF, 2018).

The escalation in grave violations against children in the Myanmar conflict is unprecedented, with violations rising by more than 400% from July 2020 to December 2023 compared to the previous reporting period (ICC-CPI, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025a ). This surge can be traced back to rampant violence in all areas of the country and new armed actors (ICC-CPI, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025a). The Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF), as well as forces associated with them and affiliated militias, account for approximately 80% of verified violations against children, while others, including the People's Defence Forces (PDFs) and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), account for 10% (ICC-CPI, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025a). Overall, this adds a more complex landscape to the issue of the recruitment of children, making mitigation and accountability more difficult.

Recruitment and use of children remains the most frequently verified grave violation, with 40% of all violations attributed to recruitment (approximately 2,200 children recruited) (ICC-CPI, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025a). The MAF has recruited nearly 2,000 child soldiers alone since the 2021 coup (Mizzima, 2024; United States Department of State, 2024). Children are exploited in many roles. For example, they have been used as combatants, messengers, porters, cooks, and to provide sexual services (ICC-CPI, 2009; Schauer & Elbert, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2020). Children have also been used as human shields and mine sweepers, which is a war crime (Human Rights Watch, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2020; Myanmar National News Agency, 2024; United Nations, 2015; United States Department of State, 2024).

The military junta's "scorched earth" strategies, for the burning of over 100,000 homes since May 2021 until August 2024 – mostly during the May 2021 – August 2024 period in the Sagaing Region, as well as indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilians' infrastructure (schools, hospitals, religious sites and IDP camps) is creating an environment, where children are living permanently in a situation of violence (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Attacks on schools and hospitals have surged a staggering 1,340% compared to the previous reporting period (ICC-CPI, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025a). The staggering increase in child casualties as a direct result of landmines, explosive remnants of war (ERW), resulted in a horrifying total number of 1,052 child casualties in 2023. In 2023, Myanmar recorded the highest number of landmine casualties in the world, and is now one of only 4 countries still using antipersonnel mines (Human Rights Watch, 2025). The increase in attacks on traditionally safe places indicates a systematic



plan to destroy civilian infrastructure and deny children their basic rights, changing civilian areas into conflict zones and aiming to destroy community resilience.

The widespread and increasing violence and ongoing destruction of key services such as education and health create a “new normal” for childhood that is synonymous with violence, displacement, and deprivation (ICC-CPI, 2009; Schauer & Elbert, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2025; Wickham, 2025; Myanmar National News Agency, 2024). The ongoing normalization of violence prompts children to perceive a future engaged in armed conflict, which can appear as a viable or even a necessary form of future, reinforcing the human cost of the ongoing conflict. The systematic destruction of schools and denial of humanitarian access could be interpreted as collateral damage, however they could also symbolize the tactical denial of future capital for the development of the opposing group, as using denying children an education and health they guarantee a less developed and less healthy generation to the future, which continues the cycle of instability and undermines recovery following violent conflict.

In addition to this, since the coup in 2021, over 3.2 million people have been internally displaced, with over 1.8 million of those since October 2023, living in temporary camps and lacking essential items (Human Rights Watch, 2025). The mass internal movement of forced displacement also further fragments the community and increases the vulnerability of children to recruitment (Humanium, n.d., International Committee of the Red Cross, n.d.).

#### **4. Implications of Child Soldiery in Myanmar for Human Security**

The abuse of child soldiers in Myanmar has widespread consequences for human security, extending beyond the immediate suffering of child participants (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2021; UNICEF, 2018). It undermines the stability and development of affected communities and perpetuates cycles of violence and poverty (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2021). The presence of child soldiers undermines community order and trust (UNICEF, 2018). Families are torn apart, and communities are left to cope with the loss of their children and the trauma of ongoing conflict (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2021). This crisis has long-term effects, impeding social integration and development (UNICEF, 2018).

The use of child soldiers perpetuates a cycle of violence (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2021). Children growing up in areas of ongoing conflict participate in violence, either as combatants or in other roles (UNICEF, 2018). This continuation of the conflict undermines efforts to achieve lasting peace and stability in Myanmar (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2021). There are

also important economic consequences to the recruitment and use of child soldiers (UNICEF, 2018). Conflict undermines education and economic activity, trapping communities in poverty (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2021). The loss of a generation to conflict has long-term consequences for economic growth and development (UNICEF, 2018).

Various international and local efforts have been made to address the issue of child soldiers in Myanmar (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2019). However, the effectiveness of these countermeasures varies, and significant challenges remain (Human Rights Watch, 2019). International legal frameworks, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts, provide the basis for the protection of children from recruitment and use in armed conflict (United Nations, 1989).

The Government of Myanmar has taken steps to address the issue, including developing a national action plan to end the recruitment of child soldiers (Child Soldiers International, 2020), but these attempts often lack resources as they need political will to implement them effectively (Child Soldiers International, 2020). Corruption and lack of accountability within the Tatmadaw further hinder progress (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a significant role in addressing the issue of child soldiers (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2021). Support is also provided for the demobilization, rehabilitation, and reintegration of former child soldiers (Child Soldiers International, 2020). Programs focus on education, job training, and psychological support (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2021). Although these efforts are important, they often face financial challenges and political obstacles (Child Soldiers International, 2020).

#### **4.1. Crippling Economic and Developmental Stagnation**

The recruitment and use of child soldiers can have extreme and long-lasting economic impacts; they trap communities in a cycle of poverty and have large deterrent impacts, putting a much higher cost on national development.

##### **4.1.1. Disturbance to Education and Long-Term Loss of Human Capital**

Conflict disrupts education, causing significant dropout rates and a large loss of human capital that traps communities into poverty and lingers for years to come, complicating future generations' economic growth. Child soldiers experience costs associated with the loss of key services, especially education, that are disrupted due to abduction, displacement, lack of teachers, dangerous walks to school, and parental poverty (ICC-CPI, 2009; Schauer & Elbert, 2009; Wickham, 2025). Schools



can be caught up in the fighting or become resources for propaganda or recruitment (ICC-CPI, 2009; Wickham, 2025).

Family poverty and the high cost of education in Myanmar will lead families to put children into the labor force (Humanium, n.d.; Wickham, 2025). Schooling can be done indirectly, as education costs can be close to 75% of a family's monthly minimum wage income and prohibitively inefficient (Wickham, 2025). Enrollment rates drop significantly going from primary to secondary school, directly aligned with an increase in working children; 88.9% of children aged 5-11 are going to school, yet only 47.7% of 15-17-year-olds are attending school, and of those, 75.6% are working (Wickham, 2025).

Due to arduous hours of labor with little pay and reasonable workplace safety, child soldiers cannot be in school and therefore negatively affect the adult literacy levels, and most children have neither been in school nor can they read or write (Wickham, 2025). Furthermore, being victimized by shade trauma during childhood has negative effects on education by lowering the number of years of schooling, promoting reading issues, and lowering occupational functioning, often culminating in school refusal and drop-out (Schauer & Elbert, 2009). The current level of education in Myanmar, departing from burgeoning costs and low levels of family income, is an existing "education-poverty trap" that children find themselves caught in.

The addition of child soldiers, not only conflicts but abuses children in ways that make the "education-poverty trap" nearly impossible to escape for children already in peril, often layering 'additional' physical dangers, environmental devastation (displacement), and psychological trauma; degrees of dangers that further distance children away from success. Thus, there exists a self-perpetuating cycle, where lack of education leads to low-skilled labor (which causes poverty), leading to children's vulnerability to recruitment, and so on, facilitating mediocrity across generations, where every child is and will be constrained to low levels of economic mobility.

#### **4.1.2. Entrenchment of Poverty and Hindered Economic Productivity**

The experience of a generation lost to conflict has long-term implications for economic growth and development that last into adulthood, entrapping communities in cycles of deprivation and negatively impacting national productivity (UNICEF, 2018). Child soldiers use is a significant factor in obstructing national development as it leads to lost human capital and diminished productivity (ISS Africa, 2025; The Upstream Journal, n.d.). This leads to long-term economic

stagnation, less participation in the workforce, and higher poverty levels for the countries involved (ISS Africa, 2025).

The pervasive reliance on unskilled labor in Myanmar's economy leaves future economic growth deeply compromised, as Myanmar's ability to access skilled labor is rapidly decreasing (Wickham, 2025). Businesses in Myanmar have consistently emphasized skill shortages as the most serious business constraint (Wickham, 2025). Only 13% of Myanmar's workforce is in the highest-paid employment, with two-thirds of employed workers employed in low-skilled (38%) and subsistence agriculture (29%) (Wickham, 2025). Low-skilled child labor hinders productivity rates by as much as 50-75% below China's, Thailand's, and Vietnam's (Wickham, 2025).

Poverty is a major contributing factor to the rise in underage recruitment (Humanium, n.d.; Wickham, 2025; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2016; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2023; Pulitzer Center, n.d.; United States Department of State, 2024). Myanmar is Asia's seventh poorest country, and 32% of the population is below the poverty line (Humanium, n.d.; Wickham, 2025). Many households are surviving on low wages, which causes 14.7% of households to need an additional income source; that generally comes from child labor (Wickham, 2025). Children also work to pay off debts to their families (Wickham, 2025). This starts a horrible feedback loop – poverty leads to recruitment, while recruitment deepens poverty by removing children from participating in productive economic roles, and children who face torments stop their education, which can carry long-lasting health and social costs. These factors keep communities in a constant state of economic deprivation, demonstrating that poverty alleviation is not merely a humanitarian goal but also a significant part of any conflict prevention strategy. Without education further exacerbates poverty, shackling families from any sort of economic movement for generations (Wickham, 2025).

The economic and occupational losses of former child soldiers suffering from trauma-spectrum disorders, for example, with problems concentrating and aggressive outbursts resulting in long-term unemployment (Schauer & Elbert, 2009), are an enormous burden in national development that is often ignored. This points out that comprehensive mental health services should not be viewed as simply social expenditures, but essentially as economic capital investments for post-conflict recovery and national economic productivity.

#### **4.1.3. Deterrent to Investment & Wider National Development Impairment**

The ongoing instability and conflict that arises because of the widespread use of child soldiers is actively deterring further foreign investment and broader national development and contributes to the pervading atmosphere of underdevelopment (ISS Africa, 2025). The military, and in some cases the rebels, are using “scorched



earth“ tactics involving the destruction of over 100,000 homes, (Human Rights Watch, 2025) and indiscriminate attacks on civilian infrastructure (ICC-CPI, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025a; Human Rights Watch, 2025), which are actively destroying physical capital and generating a mass of displaced people that further damages the economy. Furthermore, it is not simply the destructiveness of the conflict as a by-product of instability, but these actions are deliberate in their design to destroy the economic base and social ties of communities, specifically targeting places that represent a level of resistance. This represents an active and deliberate sabotage of the economy that is aimed at trying to maintain dominance and control by keeping the groups truly impoverished.

#### **4.2. Persistent Challenges and the Path Forward**

The growing crisis in Myanmar requires urgent and thorough action, and requires an understanding of the ongoing issues, especially new developments, no accountability, and root causes.

##### **4.2.1 Expanding Grave Violations and Recent Recruitment Trends**

A recent report (UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025) covers grave violations against children in Myanmar and the increase of these violations has been massive and very concerning, representing the increased severity in Myanmar's conflict and motivation for immediate action. The report covering July 2020 to the end of December 2023 indicates that grave violations against children in Myanmar increased over 400 percent compared to the earlier reporting period (ICC-CPI, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025a). The increase in grave violations is attributed to the violence seen across the country and the propping up of new armed actors (ICC-CPI, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025).

During this time 5,141 grave violations were verified against 4,089 children (3,238 boys, 721 girls, 130 sex unknown) (ICC-CPI, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025a); The Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF) and its associated forces and militias accounted for nearly 80% of these verified violations and the armed groups incorporating People's Defence Forces (PDFs) and ethnic armed organizations made up 10% (ICC-CPI, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025a). This post-coup deterioration and diversification of perpetrators is an important development. The alarming rise in grave violations and new armed actors appeared directly linked to the 2021 military coup and escalated conflict, representing a broader and more complex context of child recruitment and ultimately complicating intervention and accountability.

The major grave violation was recruitment and use of children, which accounted for 40% of all violations and impacted approximately 2,200 children (ICC-CPI, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025a). The MAF alone had recruited nearly 2,000 children, or child soldiers, since the coup in 2021 (Mizzima, 2024; United States Department of State, 2024). The killing (470 children) and maiming (1,165 children) affected 1,635 children, stemming from explosive ordnance used in populated areas. The number of incidents caused by landmines and unexploded ordnance surged during the current armed conflict, with total casualties increasing from 328 in 2021 to 1052 in 2023 (ICC-CPI, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025a; Human Rights Watch, 2025).

Incidents of attacks committed against schools (211 incidents) and hospitals (77 incidents) alarmingly amplified by 1,340% compared to the previous reporting period, imposing significant disruption to children's access to education and health services (ICC-CPI, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025a; Human Rights Watch, 2025). This shocking increase indicates a purposeful effort to destroy civilian infrastructure and rob children of their rights, and perform it not only in a right-vacuum, but more disturbing, the core of this behaviour is turning these traditional "safe spaces" into conflict zones. This blatantly contravenes international humanitarian law intended to protect civilians and fundamental services, to dismantle community resiliency, and push displacement.

Other grave violations amounted to 519 abducted children (ICC-CPI, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025a). The incarceration of children by both the MAF and the Myanmar Police Force for alleged association with armed groups increased by 1,175%, with 255 children incarcerated (ICC-CPI, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025a). Denial of humanitarian access was recorded in 497 incidents (ICC-CPI, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025a). The UN verified more child casualties in the first nine months of 2024 than they verified for all of 2023, indicating likely a greater increase in violations for the upcoming annual report (Security Council Report, 2025).



The following table provides a quantitative overview of the verified grave violations against children in Myanmar from July 2020 to December 2023:

**Table 1: Grave Violations against Children in Myanmar (July 2020 - Dec 2023)**

Type of Grave Violation	Number of Children Affected / Incidents	Primary Perpetrators (approx. % of total verified violations)
Total Grave Violations	5,141 violations against 4,089 children (3,238 boys, 721 girls, 130 sex unknown)	MAF, related forces, affiliated militias (~80%); Armed groups incl. PDFs (~10%)
Recruitment and Use	2,195 children	MAF, related forces, affiliated militias; Armed groups incl. PDFs
Killing and Maiming	1,635 children (470 killed, 1,165 maimed)	MAF, related forces, affiliated militias; Armed groups incl. PDFs
Rape and other forms of sexual violence	6 girls, 1 boy	MAF, related forces, affiliated militias; Armed groups incl. PDFs
Attacks on Schools and Hospitals	288 incidents (211 schools, 77 hospitals)	MAF, related forces, affiliated militias; Armed groups incl. PDFs
Abduction	519 children	MAF, related forces, affiliated militias; Armed groups incl. PDFs
Detention	255 children	MAF, Myanmar Police Force
Denial of Humanitarian Access	497 incidents	MAF, all other parties

Source: *Children and Armed Conflict, UN (2025) (ICC-CPI, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025a)*

#### **4.2.2. Addressing Root Causes: Poverty, Displacement, and Conflict Dynamics**

Long-term solutions to end child soldiers in Myanmar need to be full-spectrum solutions to reduce the possibility of recruitment by addressing poverty, mass displacement, and the unique evolving realities related to the protracted conflict

Poverty is the most raised issue as an overarching driver of child recruitment (Humanium, n.d.; Wickham, 2025; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2016; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2023; Pulitzer Center, n.d.; International Committee of the Red Cross, n.d.). Myanmar has structural poverty where 32% of the population lives below the poverty line, and children are compelled to work to keep their families afloat (Humanium, n.d.; Wickham, 2025). Low wages and family debt often force families to rely on their children to help generate family income (Wickham, 2025). On top of this, when poverty is partnered with displacement, that puts children in situations of poverty, poverty and displacement are “vulnerability multipliers,” which make children highly vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups; recruitment does not always rely on coercive acts to bring a minor in. This means that developmental solutions are not merely humanitarian actions to ease suffering; they are critical pre-emptive steps to keep children from being labelled as child soldiers as they directly address poverty and close off the pool of at-risk children.

The ongoing civil war and the advent of new armed agents, especially the People’s Defence Forces (PDFs) in tandem with the Tatmadaw and existing ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), means there is continuously and diversely a demand to recruit (ICC-CPI, 2009; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2025a; Human Rights Watch, 2025; UN Children and Armed Conflict, 2016; Al Jazeera, 2012; The Foreign Policy Association, n.d.; The Upstream Journal, n.d.; Human Rights Watch, 2007a; Human Rights Watch, 2004; United States Department of State, 2024; United Nations, 2015; Refworld, 2004). Often recruiting occurs as an act of right by the state and non-state actors or as forced conscription, however sometimes recruitment is engendered as “voluntary” enlistment on the part of agents if extreme circumstances demand the need (Al Jazeera, 2012; The Foreign Policy Association, n.d.; United States Department of State, 2024).

With the emergence of new armed actors such as PDFs, the recruitment picture is becoming increasingly fragmented and complicated. This presents further challenges for monitoring and accountability and implementation of action plans, requiring more flexible, local, and adaptable engagement strategies to engage with the varying motivations and approaches from all the actors involved.

Other barriers to recruitment and reintegration, important for sustained solutions, are the absence of functional schools and the availability of narcotics (The Foreign Policy Association, n.d.). Sustainable solutions will require viable DDR programmes, continual funding, and partnerships with governments, NGOs and



international agencies (ISS Africa, 2025; The Upstream Journal, n.d.). Enhancing child protection systems, at all levels of governments and all sectors of society, is a necessary pre-condition to protect children from recruitment and to promote their welfare (ISS Africa, 2025; The Upstream Journal, n.d.).

## 5. Conclusion

Conflict-related child abuse in Myanmar represents a profound human security issue that requires immediate and sustained attention. The recruitment and use of child soldiers have devastating physical, psychological, and social consequences for these vulnerable populations, as well as undermining the stability and development of affected communities. Forced recruitment of children in the military and the exposure of children to the immediate threat of war, risk of severe injury, and even death. It affects their mental health and overall well-being (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021; 2019).

Despite international and local efforts to mitigate these issues, significant challenges remain regarding the implementation and effectiveness of existing countermeasures (Child Soldiers International, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2019). Strengthening legal frameworks to ensure continued compliance with international treaties such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is essential to protect children from custody and hostile exploitation (United Nations, 1989, 2020). Community-based strategies that focus on education, economic opportunities, and social support networks are equally important (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2021). These measures not only prevent the early recruitment of children but also facilitate their reintegration into society after liberation from armed groups.

Resolving this crisis will require a holistic, longer-term approach and will not happen through direct humanitarian responses alone. Achieving this requires strong mechanisms to uphold international laws and hold all perpetrators accountable, no matter their affiliations. Additionally, we need to commit to supporting long-term community reintegration programs that address mental health, education, and economic opportunities. Equally importantly, sustainable solutions must address the root causes of vulnerability, including extreme poverty and mass displacement. A comprehensive humanitarian and development response must prioritize building resilience and alternative livelihoods to armed group membership or involvement. Without this, the cycle of violence and suffering for Myanmar's children and society will continue.

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## Ethical and Originality Statement

The Author(s) declare that this work is original and has never been published in any form or any other media, nor is it under consideration for publication in any journal, and all sources cited in this work refer to the basic standards of scientific citation.

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